



SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



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IN CONCERT: Blues on the Dividing Lines - Santa Barbara Blues Society brings country blues singer Doug MacLeod to Warren Hall for this year's Member Appreciation Show

BY JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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DOUG MACLEOD

When: 8:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Warren Hall, 3400 Calle Real, Earl Warren Showgrounds

Cost: Free for members plus one

Information: 722-8155, sbblues.org

Kicking off the new year in high, lean-machined country style, acclaimed acoustic Master Doug MacLeod will give the first big local blues show of the year this Saturday night at Warren Hall, which has come to be known as the local room for the blues, thanks to its status as the official headquarters of the Santa Barbara Blues Society.

MacLeod, who has done a few Blues Society shows over the decades, is this year's official performer in the society's annual Member Appreciation Show. Masterful in solo mode, he has the goods to get the dance floor shimmying, and has many a story up his sleeve.

New York-born and St. Louis-raised, MacLeod is now 64, and a blues player in both electric and acoustic modes for most of his life. Summoning up a rich, deep sound all by his lonesome, MacLeod is a fine singer and guitarist with a tasty bottleneck riff and a driving rhythmic sense. His songbook is bold and original, tapped by many blues greats for inspiration.

He has over a dozen albums to his credit from over a quarter-century, and he will release "Brand New Eyes," his first album on a new record deal with San Francisco-based Reference Recordings in March.

Early this week, the affable MacLeod spoke on the phone from his home in Lomita, Calif. before heading out to other parts of the state, including Santa Barbara.

How much touring do you generally do in a year?

Well, not enough so that my wife gets mad. I really don't know how many days. Maybe 200 or something like that. I don't count 'em. I just do 'em. Everything's good with the family, so things are cool.

You've actually done a lot of things in and around music, including hosting a blues radio show on KLON, being a columnist for Blues Revue Magazine and creating a few handfuls of albums. But is live playing something you really take a shining to?

I love it. I still do. I still love the whole thing. I still travel sort of like the old guys did. I travel alone, with one suitcase, one guitar, and that's it. And if I didn't have to have a cell phone, then I wouldn't do that. But you gotta have 'em nowadays. I still love playing live, being around people and hearing what they say.

You have impressive chops as a one-man band, with your rhythmic guitar playing, slide riffs and strong voice. Was that always your intention, to be self-contained as a music maker?

Actually, I gave up the solo thing for a while. I had an electric band and did four albums with them back in the '80s. I remember I told my wife, "You know, I think I want to go back to just playing solo." That meant smaller rooms and so on, but I just wanted to do that.

I started out as an acoustic guy. Actually, I started off as a bass player, years ago in St. Louis, and then switched over to guitar.

Did you fall for the blues early on, or did you take a roundabout path to the music?

Honestly, as the years have gone on, I think the blues chose me. What I mean by that is that I had a tough childhood, when I was a kid. I remember my buddy in St. Louis, I call him The Crow, said, "Let's go hear some blues." I didn't want to go hear it. I said, "Look, man, let's listen to some rock and roll or some doo-wop. I don't want to hear this." He said, "Come on, man, come on."

So we went down to not East St. Louis, but a part of St. Louis that was a pretty rough area. That was my first introduction to it. Of course, I loved the music, but also what I picked up from it was that people were laughing and they were eating good, and they were drinking good. I come to find out later on that they were loving good.

I thought, here I was with a chip on my shoulder, ever since I was a little boy. These people had been through worse times than me, and they knew how to live life. I said to myself, "I think I've got to hang around this." That's how I got into it.

Obviously, pain is a theme in the blues, but there's so much pure celebration, too. That's what I've always loved about the music.

Me, too. That's what I saw. I saw that. Everybody's got some kind of pain in their life. Everybody does. I think blues teaches you how to maybe laugh at it, or at least handle it. That's why I think it's such great music.

When did you know that the blues would be your life, as a musical focus and as a livelihood?

I think I knew it when I met this old one-eyed blues singer in Virginia. I knew him as Ernest Banks. I never knew if that was his real name or not. I think he was originally from Texas, 'cause the guy that introduced me to him said, "You want to meet a guy who ran with Blind Lemon Jefferson?" I said, "OK." So I think he was somebody else, but I'm not sure.

I met this fella, and at first he didn't like me. I remember I made such a fool out of myself the first time I met him (laughs). As I was walking out, he put his arm around me and he said, "You know where I live now, boy, don't you?" I said, "Does this mean I can come back?" He says, "You ain't deaf, too, are you, boy?" I came back to see him.

Years later, I wondered about when he said that to me, "You know where I live now." I knew part of that was how to reach him, in Virginia, because he lived off the main road, Chicken Hominy Road. You had to find this magnolia tree and you turned right at that tree. You went back in the pines to find his place. I know he meant that, but I wondered if he also meant if I knew where he lived in his soul, in his heart.

He was the guy who told me, "Never play a note you don't believe and never write or sing about what you don't know about." As soon as I heard that, I had a feeling that this might be what I was supposed to do.

Was that a point, then, when more educational research began, digging into the blues tradition and listening to old blues greats, and finding your place in the music?

Well, yes, but I think that happened before. Like most musicians, I started to listen to these guys, but it really changed when I met him. What he was telling me was not about the music, so much. It was what was behind the music. That's what I got from him.

I remember he was a rough old guy, you know, and cantankerous. He only had one eye, but he could look at you with that one eye and it would be like there were 15 eyes on you, if you did something wrong and he didn't like it. The lessons he gave me, which kept me in good standing, was that I went on with my life and began to meet and play with other people, like Mama Thornton and George Smith and Joe Turner and all these folks, the lessons I learned from him helped me be strong with that.

Obviously, songwriting is one of your strong suits. Was that a process that you latched onto from way back when? How did that come into the picture?

I think where that came from, and how that happened, was that I had a stutter when I was a kid. I couldn't speak too well. I spoke hardly at all. But when I started to sing, this voice came out and the stutter seemed to go away.

I really think, now, after all these years have gone by, that songwriting is an expression. Sometimes, things are bottled up inside of you and you can't say anything when you get the opportunity to do it. You say, "Man, I got something to say," but you can't say it (laughs).

You've had your songs covered by some blues legends, like Albert King and Albert Collins. Is there a special satisfaction in hearing them cover your material, to be plugged into their musical lives in that way?

I'll say. It kind of gives you the sense that you've arrived, or maybe that you do it well. There has always been the cross-culture thing with me. A lot of folks are aware of that. Back in the early days — even in my early days — it was predominantly a black music. So when these fellas, who were your idols, did the songs, that kind of made me feel like, "Hey, I might have a handle on this."

The Santa Barbara Blues Society shows have provided a great forum for bringing some of the best blues musicians around through our town. You travel a lot. Do you find a lot of similar blues societies or other organizations around the country, and beyond?

There are similar organizations, but I'll be frank with you: I think that the Santa Barbara one, besides being the oldest one, may be the strongest one of them all. They are an amazing group of people. They have supported this music for years.

In fact, as I remember, I think the first time I came up there was with a combination show of Pee Wee Crayton and George "Harmonica" Smith. I was playing electric guitar back then. I think we played in a little club up there, must have been around 1981.

There was a blind disc jockey by the name of Greg Drust (a co-founder and early director of the Blues Society). He thought I was black (laughs).

Well, that was a compliment.

Maybe so, but maybe not to my father (laughs). He said something like, "It's really nice to hear a young black man do this music." I said, "Yeah, I guess it is," but then I realized he was talking about me (laughs). We used to laugh about that all the time. Oh, my goodness.

You must feel like you're carrying a torch for this music, which doesn't get enough appreciation, at least in America.

Especially the acoustic side of it. Maybe so. I think I'm one of the few guys now that's actually doing it and writing their own songs. That's like the old tradition. I always thought that guys like Big Bill Broonzy, Lightnin' Hopkins and Willie McTell — just to name a few there — were all singer-songwriters. They were writing their own songs and singing them, and had a guitar. They were doing that back in the '20s and the '30s, and the guys before them had to be doing the same thing.

I just consider myself really a singer-songwriter, who happens to be coming from the blues point of view. I guess, in a way, I am sort of like a (crusader). I hope I'm not the last of 'em (laughs).